

Module 1 – Environment

Indicator 4: Fostering appropriate standards of behavior that support a productive learning environment for all students

Reflection Paper:

The learning process started on the very first day of school for me. I had preconceived ideas of what I wanted my classroom to look like, but had never been given total control of a classroom. As a student teacher, you are always given restrictions by your professors and cooperating teacher. This was my chance to create a classroom environment I believed to be valuable for my students. I knew at the start of the school year I did not want a completely silent classroom with students working at their desks. I envisioned students moving about the room, talking with their peers, taking on responsibility, and getting directly involved in the material. I needed to find a classroom management plan that allowed this to happen.

The first tool in my learning process happened unexpectedly through trial and error. At the start of the year I was very adamant about having students involved in creating the classroom rules and expectations, but when it came time for my reading group to start I found I did not involve them as much as I had planned. I found it hard to involve one group, my reading group, when I had many other students coming in and out of my classroom throughout the day. I felt what I had planned and pictured was more for a general education classroom than a special education resource room. Even though I discussed the expectations and rules of the classroom with the students, I did not have any visuals around the classroom. After a couple weeks of constant reminding of the expectations I decided it was time to put visual reminders of the rules around the room. I thought it would be appropriate to follow the school wide language and make signs that read "Voice Quiet", "Eyes Watching", "Ears Listening", and "Body Still". My school uses a program called *Second Step* to teach social and emotional skills to further encourage academic success. The social worker spends time in each classroom working with students and teaching the correct ways of conveying their feelings. I worked with the social worker, before making the signs, to establish I was keeping with the correct language from *Second Step*. Through this research, in *Second Step*, and my own experience I found having students involved provides more of a positive response from students. This led me to take a picture of all students and put their pictures on the posters. The students now have themselves directly involved in the rules posted around the classroom as a reminder of the proper behavior. When teaching I can now quietly point to the posters or hint that a student needs to act as they did in the poster. I do not have to interrupt a lesson, activity, or story to talk about the rules and expectations, which allows for much smoother behavior management.

The second resource I used in my research of classroom management was observation of experienced and respected teachers. At the beginning of the year I spent a lot of time in first grade classrooms. It gave me the opportunity to see what experienced teachers have learned in regards to what strategies are successful in classroom management. I learned from this experience that many children love routine. A routine in the classroom makes the students feel safe and secure. Many of the experienced teachers display a schedule for the day as the students enter the classroom first thing in the morning. This allows students to answer their own questions about the day and be responsible for work that needs to be completed upon entering the classroom. This strategy allows the teacher to walk around the room, take care of attendance, and provide extra support to some students first thing in the morning. The teacher manages the class from the very moment students set foot in the room. The routine sets a great precedent for the rest of the day.

In my observation of and collaboration with other teachers I have also learned certain techniques of talking with students. At the beginning of the school year I would ask a question such as "Do you want to earn your sticker?" when a child misbehaved or became distracted. This gives all power to the student. If the student answers "No" you, as the teacher, have lost power. I have learned to use statements in the place of questions. A statement I may now use would be "If you get to work and try your best, you will earn your sticker." This statement still gives the student the choice, but allows you to keep the power. It also keeps the student thinking positively. They did not hear they would lose their sticker, but instead the focus was kept on what needs to be done in order to earn the sticker.

Experienced teachers were not the only resource I utilized to learn about language and relationships with students. The book *Beyond Behavior Management* by Jenna Bilmes was another great learning tool for me. Bilmes focuses on eight life skills children will need as they grow and enter society. These skills include attachment, affiliation, self-regulation, initiative, problem solving and conflict resolution, and respect. As I read the book it was evident to me Bilmes finds it of the upmost importance to make a child feel safe and secure. If the child feels safe and secure there will be less problems to manage around the classroom. Many of the behavior problems I experienced early in the year, such as J crawling under tables and A avoiding eye contact, were outward expressions of their unsure feeling about me. They did not know if they could trust me yet. Since then I have learned a manner of talking to students in a way that conveys I care about them. For example, when a student says, "I don't want to work on this!" I can respond with "I know it is hard for you, but you can do this. Let's try one problem at a time." Instead of getting angry with the student for attempting to get out of work, I have learned to show the student I understand what they are going through and then suggest a solution for working through the problem. I had always heard a saying 'You may not always remember what a teacher taught you, but you will remember how that teacher made you feel.' Bilmes has shown me ways of proving to my students I care for them, believe in them, and trust them to make the correct decisions. Bilmes has helped me adjust my ways of thinking and responding to students to show my students I do care for them. This decreases student behavior problems in the classroom because my students do not need to have outbursts and strive for negative attention.

Not only did I learn different ways to talk to students in order to show understanding from *Beyond Behavior Management*, but also learned how to walk students through conversations and social situations. The book *It's So Much Work to be Your Friend* by Richard Lavoie has taught me some students do not know the correct behaviors. I had learned about certain disabilities in college, but it was hard to put all the knowledge into practical usage throughout the day. When a student acted out and behaved inappropriately at the beginning of the year, I was quick to try and respond to the behavior with scolding. This was not effective for the first few weeks. As I read Lavoie's book, it came to my attention some students may not be taught the proper behaviors at home; they need to be taught the correct behaviors at school. When I would pass A in the hallway in September he would shout "HEY!" and continue walking down the hall. The first few times I told A that was not an acceptable way to greet a teacher. After some observation I realized A might not know what a proper greeting looks like. From that moment forward whenever A greeting me with "HEY" I would stop him right there and have a short conversation about how it is not appropriate greeting, but "Hello or Hi, Miss M" would be suitable. After walking A through a few greetings, he now greets other teachers and me in acceptable ways. The student not only learned the proper greeting with teachers, but also uses what he has learned in the classroom. He greets and converses with other students in the appropriate manner. As A has learned proper ways of talking to his peers, conflict in class between students has decreased, making behavior management easier for me.

Positive reinforcement has played a huge role in my practice of classroom management. I knew before starting the year, I wanted to be a positive teacher, not a negative one. I believe positive reinforcement is an effective strategy in classroom management. James Walker, Thomas Shea, and Anne Bauer discuss the effectiveness of positive reinforcement for all student behaviors in their book *Behavior Management; A Practical Approach for Educators*. They write that research has shown positive reinforcement increases or sustains the frequency of correct behavior in the future. This has further supported my belief in responding positively to students. In the classroom I am learning to consistently praise students, no matter how small their good decision may have been. For example, I have a student, J. , who has trouble sitting still for any amount of time longer than 3 minutes. If he makes the decision to focus on an activity, book, or writing assignment for even 2 minutes I praise him for his hard work and focus. This gives him the reassurance I have noticed how hard he is working. I have observed on days when I may be working with another student and do not encourage J. , he gets side tracked and off task much more easily than the days I praise him and point him in a positive direction. He is a student that benefits from the positive reinforcement, thus preventing many behavior problems I had with J. at the beginning of the year.

I have seen much growth in my students and myself since the beginning of reading group over two months ago. In my initial summary I had written that I needed to go over the rules and expectations on a regular basis. I now find that I rarely need to remind students of the classroom rules and my personal expectations. They have grown familiar with what behaviors are expected in my classroom. I have also found the posters in the classroom have helped tremendously. As stated earlier, if there is a need to remind students of the rules I no longer need to stop class and have a discussion, but merely point to the rules for a nonverbal reminder. The behaviors included in my initial summary have long disappeared. The last entry where I noted serious behavior problems from J. was on October 17th. In addition to the decrease in behavior problems, student achievement has increased. The average score of a unit test at the end of September was sixty percent, taken with full support, while now the average test score for a unit test is eighty percent, taken with partial support. I have also had two students leave my reading group and move to an on grade level reading group. The two students that moved were able to get the proper teaching because I was no longer preoccupied with behavior management. This demonstrates how my learning and changes in practice have made me a better teacher and positively affected the students in my reading group.